

# Austinites meet up for secret suppers

## Underground dinners provide alternatives for couples, singles

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In 2001, restaurant owner Michael Hebb created uproar in the culinary world by commencing a food revolution.

Hebb started Family Supper in Portland, Oregon and turned traditional dining on its head.

He hosted an array of guests for family-style dinner parties in the most quirky of secret locations — from a freeway median to an airport hangar, a parking garage, and an industrial glass-blowing studio — mixing art, provocative dinner party conversations and gourmet cuisine.

Little did he know his idea would go on to inspire Hannah Calvert, creator of Austin's unique dinner party experience, Supper Underground, as well as many other underground dinner parties across the country.

For Calvert, the typical restaurant dining experience was dull, so a dinner party that embodied all the characteristics of a secret society became all the more appealing.

She was flipping through the pages of Food & Wine magazine in 2005 and stumbled upon a story about Hebb's dinner parties. Suddenly, her life changed.

With her free time outside of her public relations consulting job, she wanted to bring underground dining to Austin.

"I wanted to use his idea but tweak it a bit," Calvert said. "I didn't want to do family-style dining."

So in April 2006, putting on a dinner party for 17 friends all by herself, Calvert created a menu that included fried green tomato Caprese salad, chilled asparagus soup with lump crab meat, gnocchi with wild mushroom and finished with a dessert of strawberries and mangos with a balsamic zabaglione.

Even though Calvert said that the night was nerve-racking and hard to handle alone, she decided to continue putting on the Austin underground parties.

Now, almost four years later, the 50 friends on a the original e-mail list has grown to over 2,100 foreign faces with eager mouths waiting for their invite. Once a month, Calvert hosts a dinner party at a private homeowner's residence or an Austin venue for 25-30 guests.

When it comes to selecting her guests, Calvert struggles to finalize the list but admits that she has noticed a pattern.

"I try to let in all the single people I can because I think it's brave to attend alone," she said. "I've noticed men very rarely RSVP alone, and more women are more willing to attend alone. I think this is a lost opportunity for the men out there. You could meet single ladies."

While attending the first underground dinner party of 2010 on Tuesday at Austin's Big Red Sun, it is apparent that this has become an art



Bruno Morlan/The Daily Texan

Chef Taylor Hall prepares corn polenta for the Supper Underground guests that gathered at the Big Red Sun offices on East Cesar Chavez on Saturday, Jan. 16.



Bruno Morlan/The Daily Texan

A tray of bread with goose pate spread was served to Supper Underground guests.

form to Calvert and her chef Taylor Hall, who also runs his own catering business.

In a long process of planning that includes selecting the secret location, planning the menu, ordering the table and chairs, working with a graphic designer to create the invitation, deciding the number of people to invite, e-mailing invites on a Monday and finalizing the guest list on Tuesday, Calvert admits that she still experiences moments of anxiety.

"Without fail, I always have a moment when I'm nervous that we won't have enough chairs," she said.

However, Calvert has found that the kitchen is the one thing she doesn't have to worry about the night of the dinner.

"[Chef Taylor Hall] is incredibly organized," Calvert said. "You can't be disorganized, especially when you are working in a foreign space. Every move has to be efficient."

As eclectic mixes of guests ranging from their early 20s to late 50s arrived at the dinner party Tuesday, Calvert had her game face on.

Introducing herself to guests, leading everyone to the dining room, she unveiled a beautiful dinner table already set, encapsulated in a clear, temperature-controlled tent. Everything down to the dozens of tea lights nestled in birds' nests on the table had been thoroughly planned by Calvert and her team.

As the night continued, diners were at moments actively engaging in conversation and at other times quietly savoring their decadent four-course dinner of cumin-carrot soup, beet salad, braised beef short ribs and dark chocolate mousse.

"This is my fourth dinner with Hannah," said Alissa Bayer, owner and founder of Milk & Honey Spa, who has also lent her home as the location of one of the dinner parties. "You always meet someone new at the dinners and somehow end up running into them all over Austin."

As the list of those wanting to attend continues to grow, Calvert is always thinking about ways to innovate her parties, such as teaming with other local businesses like Flip Happy Crepes.

"I'd love to partner with local vendors, even local artists or musicians," she said.

For those students on the list waiting for their invitations who are inspired to create their own dinner party, Calvert and Hall have some advice.

"Use fresh and seasonal ingredients," Hall said.

Calvert said not to overcomplicate things.

"Just plan ahead, take help from friends and keep it simple," she said. "Most people can't tell the difference between seven ingredients versus 17."

For more information visit [supperunderground.com](http://supperunderground.com).

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